League expansion and subsequent team brand development is of distinct interest for scholars and sport industry professionals (Daniels, Kunkel, & Karg, 2019; Doyle, Lock, Funk, Filo, & McDonald, 2017; DeSchilder, Rascher, & Shapiro, 2016; Kunkel, Doyle, Funk, Du, & McDonald, 2016). Recently, league expansion in North American sport has been prevalent. Major League Soccer (MLS), has been at the forefront of expansion with five expansion teams confirmed to begin play prior to the 2022 season. The National Hockey League (NHL), has also entered a period of expansion. The Vegas Golden Knights began play during the 2017 NHL season, and of interest to the current project, Seattle was awarded the 32nd NHL Franchise on December, 4th, 2018, with the team set to begin play in October of 2021. The Seattle expansion is notable because to date, no name, color scheme, players, coaches, or completed arena exist. This presents an apt opportunity to research how a sport organization, lacking typical brand identity markers and extensions, can develop brand equity. Utilizing Ross’ (2006) spectator-based brand equity model, we aim to develop an understanding of the perspectives of NHL Seattle fans over time regarding the development of the new franchise.

To develop an understanding of the perspectives of NHL Seattle fans regarding the brand development of the 32nd NHL franchise, we utilized an interpretive multi-method approach of primary and secondary data collections (Delia & James, 2019). The first data collection came on the day the franchise was announced, December 4th, 2018, and consisted of a Twitter scrape of the hashtag #NHLSeattle via the social media scraping tool DiscoverText resulting in 46,869 tweets (Delia & Armstrong, 2016). Secondly, in August, 2019, a group of NHL Seattle fans were recruited through an online fan community to complete a series of open-ended questions focused on their perspectives of the development of the NHL Seattle team brand. This resulted in 121 useable responses.

Part of a longitudinal project, in this poster, we focus on the sentiment of NHL Seattle fans at two points in time. First, immediately following the franchise announcement on December 4th, 2018 via Twitter scrape and secondly in August of 2019 approximately two weeks after the naming of the General Manager via open ended response questions. Though in progress, our initial results show that following the team announcement, fan sentiment was positive with a distinct sense of excitement. In August, 2019, the sentiment was still quite positive, but was tempered by a sense of cautious optimism. Additionally, while the participants appreciated the brand development and outreach efforts of the organization, they also voiced their frustration with the “slow” development of the team name and colors. Our results also show that even without typical brand markers, fans have positive brand associations and high expectations for brand development, with the announcement of core brand markers being of utmost importance (Kunkel et al., 2016).